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To provide for the Common Defense

William Jackson

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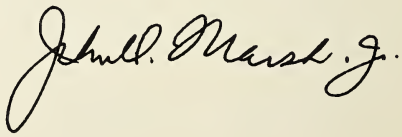
Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series

Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

WILLIAM JACKSON

Secretary to the Constitutional Convention

In all, thirty-nine delegates, designated the Founding Fathers by a grateful nation, signed the Constitution in September 1787. But in fact a fortieth name appears on that historic document, that of William Jackson, the Secretary of the Convention, whose signature authenticated the results of the sessions in Philadelphia. Although Jackson lacked the delegates' right to debate and vote on the issues, he was clearly at one with those who manifested a strong dissatisfaction with the weakness of the central government under the Articles of Confederation. His own experiences in the Revolution—as a line officer in some of the war's most frustrating campaigns and as a staff officer who worked with both the country's allies and the Continental Congress—led him to identify completely with the ideals of the nationalists. He became convinced that only a strong government, responsive to the collective will of the electorate, could regulate the country's foreign trade, organize its westward expansion, and defend its institutions. This conviction animated both his work at the Convention and his service to the nation during the presidency of George Washington.

Jackson became the quintessential civil servant. A gifted writer and orator, he employed his considerable organizational talents in the service of the new Republic, competently and unobtrusively managing the flow of official business as President Washington's private secretary. His loyalty to the President, his self-effacement before the luminaries of Washington's Cabinet, his "faithfullness and integrity," as General Benjamin Lincoln put it, established a model of professional behavior for succeeding government employees.

THE PATRIOT

Jackson's youth was one of dramatic contrasts. The son of an Englishman of some local standing in the region along the Scottish border, he received the rudimentary education typical of the area. But his limited and sheltered world was suddenly changed when his parents died and neighbors arranged for the orphan's emigration to Charleston, South Carolina, to be reared by Owen Roberts, a prominent merchant and family friend. Roberts rapidly became a formative influence on his ward, just as he was on his neighbors. A veteran of the French and Indian War, he introduced the boy to the colonial idea of the citizen-soldier by bringing Jackson along to the musters of the Charleston Battalion of Artillery (today's 263d Air Defense Artillery, South Carolina Army National Guard), which Roberts commanded. Roberts also represented Charleston's merchants and artisans in various legislative bodies.

Although criticism of the King's government was considerably muted in

the southern colonies, a majority of the people joined their northern neighbors in opposing British taxation policies and attempts to interfere in local affairs. Roberts' standing as a leader in this movement helped shape Jackson's emerging interest in the Patriot cause. In the summer of 1775, South Carolina cast her fate with her neighbors, ousting the Royal governor and voting to raise regulars to protect the colony. Roberts initially served as the major of Colonel Christopher Gadsden's 1st South Carolina Regiment, but in November he was promoted to command a new artillery regiment, the 4th South Carolina. Jackson soon followed his guardian to the colors.

Jackson may well have donned uniform prior to his seventeenth birthday. Probably with Roberts' help, he obtained appointment as a cadet in the 1st South Carolina. Eighteenth century cadets were young men preparing to become officers in effect through on-the-job training. Jackson apparently learned quickly, for in May 1776 he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the regiment.

THE SOLDIER

Jackson's battlefield initiation was not long in coming. Relying on faulty information from Americans in England and outdated letters from the last Royal governors, the King's ministers had concluded that the revolt in the southern colonies was the work of an armed minority, and that a show of force in the area would rally Loyalists and restore the governors. To prove the point, an expedition under General Sir Henry Clinton, consisting of several regiments of red-coated regulars and a small naval squadron, was mounted against Charleston, the most important of the southern cities. The invading fleet appeared off the city's harbor in June, and Jackson's unit took up position to face the foe.

South Carolina did not have to meet the challenge alone. The Continental Congress had by then accepted the responsibility for the war effort, and its delegates had begun drafting a Declaration of Independence. The state transferred its regular regiments to national control as part of the new Continental Army. Reinforced by other units from North Carolina and Virginia, along with a force of local militia, the Americans under Major General Charles Lee repulsed the British, ending the first significant threat to the region with relative ease.

While attention focused on events further north during the next years, the 1st South Carolina Regiment settled down to garrison duty in Charleston and the forts around the large harbor. Jackson spent his time perfecting the skills of a junior officer, winning two promotions. During the latter part of this period, Jackson first witnessed the defeat of American forces under arms. In 1778 Major General Robert Howe, who had succeeded Lee, assembled a small force of regulars and militiamen in Georgia, intending to capture the

Miniature, by unknown artist (1793), Independence National Historical Park Collection.

thinly settled and lightly defended Royal colony of East Florida, a rallying point for the region's Loyalists. But Howe lacked the logistical apparatus to sustain even a small force, and bickering between contingents halted operations short of St. Augustine, the objective. When an epidemic then broke out in the American force, Jackson's regiment was among the ragtag remnant forced to fall back to South Carolina.

Congress reacted to the fiasco of the Florida invasion by replacing the prickly Howe with Major General Benjamin Lincoln of Massachusetts. The delegates hoped that Lincoln's background as a militia commander would improve civil-military relations in the south and enable the Americans to withstand new threats by the British. Forced to recast their strategic objectives after France entered the war as America's ally in 1778, the British had shifted forces to Georgia. They intended to recapture the colonies one at a time, gaining momentum as they rolled north.

London's southern strategy led indirectly to a major change in Jackson's career. His regimental commander (and future signer of the Constitution), Charles C. Pinckney, believed that Lincoln needed a diplomatic assistant to bridge any gap between the Yankee general and his southern subordinates. He persuaded Lincoln to appoint Jackson as an aide. The assignment carried with it a temporary promotion to the rank of major and brought the twenty-year-old into contact with men from a completely different section of the nation. Jackson served with Lincoln in skirmishes that followed the American

loss of Savannah, including the bloody battle at Stono Ferry in June 1779, and later in an American counteroffensive at Savannah in conjunction with the Comte d'Estaing's French fleet and troops. During these operations, Jackson again saw the Americans defeated. At Stono Ferry he also experienced personal tragedy when his guardian was killed in action. After the unsuccessful siege of Savannah, Jackson participated in the allied retreat and watched French and American commanders blame each other for the failure.

Worse reverses were to come in 1780. Clinton reacted to the Savannah counterattack by shifting additional forces to the south and launching a new attack on Charleston. This time adequate resources enabled the British to conduct a formal siege. Lincoln refused to withdraw and valiantly prolonged the siege for forty-two days, but finally had to surrender on 12 May in the worst American defeat of the war. Jackson was among the almost 5,000 captured. Because of his status as an aide, he escaped the horrors of the disease-ridden prisoner-of-war facilities and was sent instead on parole to Philadelphia. In November he, along with Lincoln and others, was exchanged.

The fall of Charleston marked Jackson's last appearance on the battlefield. His skill as a staff officer and Lincoln's influence led shortly to his assignment as secretary to Lt. Col. John Laurens, Washington's aide. The two South Carolinians went to France to negotiate the shipment of vital war supplies. Laurens returned in the summer with materiel for the Yorktown campaign, leaving Jackson behind to coordinate with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams and the Dutch government for the shipment of more supplies. Jackson finally arrived back in Philadelphia in early 1782 and accepted Lincoln's offer to serve as Assistant Secretary at War. Lincoln had become the first Secretary a few months earlier, and he now relied heavily on his former aide to help with the day-to-day operations of the office and to act as a liaison between Congress and the Army. In October 1783, with demobilization almost complete, Jackson resigned.

THE STATESMAN

The death of Jackson's guardian had seriously altered the young veteran's prospects. Influenced by his friends and his wartime experiences, he quit Charleston to seek new opportunities. He first decided to become a merchant and to that end traveled through Europe in the early months of peace. But life in the trading house held little appeal, and he finally settled down in Philadelphia to study law, winning admittance to the bar in the summer of 1788.

Jackson's intense interest in the political discussion of the day caused him to interrupt his legal training. When the Constitutional Convention assembled in Philadelphia in 1787, he successfully applied for the position as its Secretary. His wartime contacts with many of the delegates, especially Alexander

Hamilton, clearly helped him edge out Benjamin Franklin's grandson for the post. Jackson was sworn to protect the secrecy of the deliberations, and, on instruction of the delegates, he destroyed all records except for the official journal after the final draft of the Constitution was signed.

Jackson hoped to serve as a legislative secretary in the new federal government, but he failed to secure a post in the Senate. Instead, he was selected by Washington to be his secretary, thus becoming one of the original civil servants in the executive department. He performed well in that demanding assignment, drawing on his wartime skills as an aide, before resigning for financial reasons in December 1791. Jackson declined Washington's offer of the post of Adjutant General of the Army and embarked on a business career and a law practice. But his marriage to a daughter of Thomas Willing, a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, led him to look more kindly on renewed federal employment. Shortly after the wedding, he was appointed surveyor of customs for the port of Philadelphia.

Jackson was a staunch supporter of the Federalist party, and when Thomas Jefferson became President in 1801, marking the executive branch's first change in political alignment, the surveyor of customs lost his job. For a time he edited Philadelphia's *Political and Commercial Register*, a pro-Federalist newspaper. He also returned to the law. In one of his last major cases he represented a group of Continental Army veterans who were petitioning for pensions originally promised during the Revolution. He always remained faithful to his old comrades in arms, serving for more than a quarter century as the national secretary of the Society of the Cincinnati, a veterans' organization of ex-officers from the Continental Army, and toward the end of his life he officially welcomed his old friend and ally, General Lafayette, to Philadelphia during the Frenchman's tour of America in 1824.

Jackson was typical of many immigrants who contributed gladly to the defense of their new homeland. A strong nationalist, he gave unstintingly of himself both in uniform and in a quieter way within the halls of national government.

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide and maintain a Navy;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 9 March 1759, at Cumberland, England
OCCUPATION: Merchant and Lawyer
MILITARY SERVICE:
Continental Army—7 years
Highest Rank—Major
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Assistant Secretary at War—2 years
Personal Secretary to the President—3 years
Surveyor of Customs—7 years
DEATH: 17 December 1828, at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
PLACE OF INTERMENT: Christ Church Cemetery, Philadelphia

Further Readings

The only biography of Jackson is Charles W. Littell's "Major William Jackson, Secretary of the Federal Convention," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 2 (1878). However, details of his life and services are contained in John Grimke, "Order Book . . . 1778 to 1780," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 13 (1912)–19 (1918); Victor Paltsits, ed., "The Siege of Charleston," *Year Book, City of Charleston for 1897*; A. S. Salley, ed., "An Order Book of the 1st Regt., S.C. Line," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 7 (1906); Harry Ward, *The Department of War, 1781–1795* (1962). Jackson's papers are in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Other books that shed light on the creation of the Constitution and the role of the military in the early history of the nation include Sol Bloom, *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Catherine Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (1966); Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* (1971); Merrill Jensen, *Making of the Constitution* (1979); Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); U.S. National Park Service, *Signers of the Constitution* (1976); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969); and Robert K. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army* (1983).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States,* by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

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